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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the value of student retention practices, or of flunking students, and presents viable options. Advocates of retention argue that it prevents future academic failure, ensures mastery of the basic skills necessary for success in higher grades, and motivates students. However, others argue that retention is associated with subsequent poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, negative attitudes toward school, and high dropout rates. Overall, research findings demonstrate that retention has no significant, positive, longterm effect on academic achievement. Alternatives to retention are programs that give students individualized time and attention, such as the Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project. Since 1987, the 42 K-3 demonstrations sites have experienced decreased dropout rates, improved achievement scores, and reduced absenteeism. However, pilot districts in general lacked specific retention polices, definitions, and criteria. A conclusion is that alternative programs are more cost effective than retention in terms of economic and personal costs. Seven recommendations for policy and practice regarding student retention are presented. Two tables are included. (LMI)

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AT-RISK RESEARCH: ISSUES & ANSWERS

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Issue: Failing Students—Is It Worth The Cost?

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Retention—flunking students—is an expensive educational strategy. Annually, between five and seven percent of the students attending U.S. public schools are retained at a cost of over $10 billion to cover the additional year of school (CPRE, 1990). An estimated 20 to 25 percent of the students in school today have been retained at least once. In Arizona, state records show that 7,957 K-8 public school students were retained during the 1990-91 school year. *Estimating the expense of an additional year for these students, this cost Arizona taxpayers almost $32 million![1]*

Is retention worth the cost? No. A myriad of research[2] has been conducted on the topic of grade retention over the past eighty years. The cumulative evidence against the practice is compelling. Retention is invariably associated with subsequent poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, negative attitudes toward school and high dropout rates. In fact, the strongest predictor of dropping out of school is being behind in grade. Why, then, does the practice persist?

Arguments supporting retention

The arguments for retention appear to be based on common sense, rather than on fact. In the early grades, retention is viewed as a way to prevent failure before it occurs. The extra year is believed to provide children with additional time for personal adjustment, maturation, and skill development. Those who believe that learning is sequential and linear advocate retention as a mechanism for insuring that students master the basic skills necessary for success in higher grades. At the high school level, retention is advocated as a strategy to prevent schools from graduating students who lack the basic skills necessary to be productive members of society. Many believe that retention serves to motivate students.

It is widely accepted that repeating a grade is necessary for a struggling student to master basic skills. For example, the 1990 Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Public Education shows that 67 percent of the respondents felt that *only* students who pass appropriate examinations should be promoted. The belief is that students who fail standardized achievement tests—but are promoted anyway—are more likely to drop out of school than students who fail the tests and are retained (Elam, 1990).

The arguments in support of retention, however, are contradicted by a large body of research that clearly demonstrates retention is an ineffective educational strategy.

What does the research say?

Research on retention systematically refutes the notion that repeating a grade has advantages. Consistently, studies show that recycling students through an additional year of the same curriculum--as is typical of most programs--is of no value for a vast majority of students.

Retention and Motivation

Retention neither motivates students, nor inspires future success. Studies show that children who are retained often develop an unrealistic sense of their own strengths and weaknesses, and that these youngsters expect to fail in future school situations. In addition, retained children tend to develop aggressive behaviors. Moreover, most children who are retained suffer a severe loss of self-confidence, feel inferior, and are insecure about their academic ability (Holmes, 1984). Flunking a grade seems to add to students' feelings of alienation and may contribute to their sense that graduation is out of reach.

Retention and Dropping Out

Riley (1986) found that retaining a student once increases by 40 to 50 percent the risk that the student will drop out before completing high school; two retentions increase the risk by 90 percent. For reasons not associated with retention, minority children have a 25 to 50 percent likelihood of dropping out of school prior to graduation. Therefore, being retained in grade one time increases their likelihood of dropping out to 65 to 100 hundred percent (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

Retention and Achievement

Some studies report positive effects associated with retention; however, they have generally been

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found to have serious design flaws (e.g., students were not typical of the population of retainees). Perhaps more importantly, studies reporting positive effects cannot attribute those effects solely to retention since students were also exposed to intensive remediation (cf. Holmes, 1989).

Some individual Arizona schools have also reported positive results, showing that students who are retained or who have been placed in "transition" classrooms (e.g., pre-first, pre-third) perform better than in previous years.[3] However, the inclusion of a control group is critical in determining the effects of retention. Control group studies allow one to compare students who have been retained with similar students who have been promoted. Without control group comparisons, the only conclusion teachers are able to make is that retained children apparently do better the second year. They are unable to see that students might do equally well had they not been retained. Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible for public schools to conduct control group studies to assess the specific impact of retention.

Overall, research shows that retention has no significant positive, *long-term* effect on academic achievement. In a preeminent meta-analysis of 63 empirical studies on retention, Holmes (1989) found that retention is "either ineffective or harmful" to children. In fact, when averaged across all studies, retention is found to have more negative effects than positive effects.

To flunk or not to flunk?

If one accepts that retention is *not* effective, one alternative is to promote children to the next grade regardless of achievement. Educators express serious concern over this practice known as "social promotion."[4] Most frequently, criticism is voiced that lax promotion policies mean the concern for student achievement has been abandoned. However, fears that social promotion contributes to a lowering of academic standards appear to be unfounded. For example, the results of 25 studies on the effects of retention on school achievement (Rose *et al.*, 1983) reveal that potential retainees who are promoted perform better academically than their retained peers. As reflected in Table A, it seems that "retained pupils fall behind during the year that they are retained and spend the rest of their academic careers in vain trying to catch up" (Holmes, 1983:4).

If social promotion and retention are the only choices for low achieving students, then social promotion is clearly the lesser of the two evils. However, a policy of social promotion is not advocated here. The mere act of promoting a student does not produce learning. What is proposed is the implementation of sound educational strategies that, when provided early, alleviate the need to retain students.

Table A.

Grade Equivalent Comparison of End-of-Year Achievement Levels for Promoted and Retained Children Over a Six Year Period*

Grade	Status of Children: Promoted	Retained	Potential retainees (Promoted)
1	1.9	1.5/2.1**	1.5
2	2.9	2.7	2.5
3	4.0	3.3	3.8
4	5.1	3.9	4.9
5	6.2	4.5	5.8
6	7.0	5.1	6.9

*Based on 25 research studies and 6,000 cases
**Children remained in grade one for two years

Alternatives to retention

The solution to academic achievement problems is neither to implement more rigid promotional policies, nor to simply disallow retention. The solution lies in better programs. Based on strategies suggested by research, "better" programs include those that provide students additional time and individualized attention. Such programs allow students to progress at their own pace and develop better skills, essentially eliminating the need for grade repetition. Strategies include: early outreach projects (e.g., preschool); full-day kindergarten and extended school-day programs; before and after school tutoring; smaller classes and reduced student-adult ratios; developmentally appropriate practices; enrichment classes; summer programs; transition centers; and multi-grade classrooms.

Arizona's At-Risk Pilot Project: In support of alternatives[5]

Initiated by H.B. 2217 (1988), the *Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project* challenged Arizona public schools to develop and pilot innovative programs to address the diverse needs of at-risk pupils. Many younger at-risk pupils are underachieving students identified as candidates for retention; many older at-risk students are those who have already been retained.

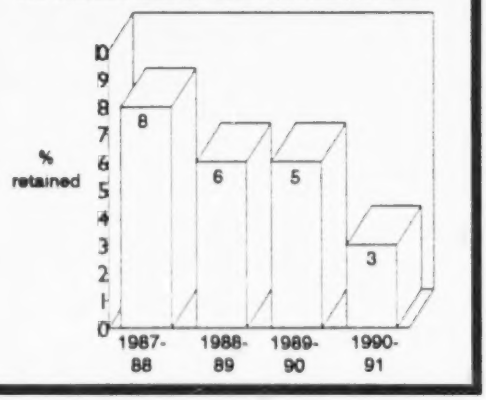
For example, among nearly 3600 K-3 at-risk students, almost 600 children had already been retained at least once. Among 1627 secondary level students, 37 percent had been held back in one or more elementary grades. *An investment of nearly $5 million for one additional year of school had already been made, yet these students were still identified as at-risk of academic failure!*

Moreover, a strong relationship was found between retention and achievement, particularly among secondary level students--the lower the grade-point average, the higher the percent of students who had been previously retained. Concurring with national research findings, being retained in grade was one of the strongest predictors of "at-riskness" and poor academic achievement.

Over 35,000 students in FY 1990-91 alone received additional instructional support as a result of the *Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project*. Most of the alternatives piloted by the participating schools are those already noted as sound practices (e.g., full-day kindergarten). Concurrent with the implementation of these alternative intervention strategies, retention rates have declined dramatically among the 42 K-3 demonstration sites as shown in Table B.

Table B.

K-3 Retention Rates for 42 K-2 At-Risk Pilot Sites



Within these same sites, other positive results also have been observed. For example, achievement scores have generally increased, and absenteeism has decreased. Reducing retention rates has not adversely affected achievement!

Morrison Institute analysts also explored whether or not lower retention rates were related to pilot program implementation, or whether they had occurred for other reasons (e.g., existing policies). Over one-half of the 42 pilot sites noted policy changes following the implementation of their K-3 at-risk program, indicating that *practice influenced policy*. Several districts indicated that retention/promotion guidelines and policies had been evaluated and revised or were undergoing review. Indeed, many districts focused attention on retention policies, and instituted changes, as a result of the focus on students most likely to be retained.

Other responses to a survey on retention, however, were disturbing. In general, pilot districts did not have *specific* retention policies nor did they share definitions of what constitutes retention. Further, no standard criteria for making retention decisions were found among the districts.

How much do alternatives cost?

There is no definitive answer to this question; there are many alternative educational strategies, each associated with varying costs. Implementing alternatives requires commitment, creativity, training, and funding. However, providing pupils with additional assistance during the school year, rather than having them spend an extra year in school, benefits both students and the state. Under such circumstances, students not only learn more but are more likely to persist to graduation. This means that the state is no longer responsible for paying the cost of one or more extra years of school.

The economic, as well as personal, costs of retention increase substantially when retainees elect to drop out of school. In Arizona, the yearly high school dropout cost to the state is estimated to be over $5 billion (Bierlein *et. al.*, 1989). The assumption that dropping out of high school saves the state money (because dropping out reduces the years of education for which the state must pay) is inaccurate.

Currently, Arizona has allocated $7.7 million per year to support the 55 pilot at-risk programs ($5.5 million for K-3 programs, $2.2 million for 7-12 programs). Supporting such programs *statewide--at all grade levels*--will be far more costly. However, in comparison to the expense of retention (i.e., $32 million in FY 1990-91), its cost to human lives, and evaluation data illustrating positive results from alternative strategies, the investment in preventive strategies is clearly prudent. Retention is a very expensive educational strategy with few documented benefits.

Recommendations for policy

Ideally, educational practices and policy decisions should be built on sound research. In reference to retention, research shows that the systematic implementation of alternatives to retention are better for students, especially those who are most at-risk. The issues presented in this paper have implications for both policy and practice. The following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- Educators, policymakers, and the general public should be made aware of the critical research evidence on the effects of retention and alternative educational strategies.

• Pre-service and in-service training programs for teachers and administrators should emphasize the disadvantages of retention and focus on more positive solutions for remediation.

• The state, local school boards, and educational administrators should carefully examine their current retention policies and practices in light of the research on retention. Policies should be adopted that discourage the practice and promote alternative strategies.

• Districts should specifically examine the use of standardized test results as a criterion for retention.

• The Arizona Department of Education should develop a common definition of what constitutes retention for use with their current database.

• Local districts should encourage and support teachers in conducting action research on retention and its alternatives in their own schools/classrooms.

• State and local *cost-effectiveness* studies should be conducted regarding retention and its alternatives; continued support of programs that emphasize early intervention and remediation should be recognized as a wise investment for the state.

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Endnotes

1. Based on 1989-90 average per pupil cost, excluding capital and adjusted by an inflation increase of 4.1 percent.

2. Only selected references are cited in this paper. Readers are invited to contact Morrison Institute if interested in the complete bibliography used to prepare this document.

3. A majority of educators consider the use of "transition" classrooms tantamount to retention. Such classrooms have increasingly been phased out of school districts as a viable alternative to repeating a grade.

4. In fact, 72% of nearly 1,000 K-3 Arizona educators felt that students were being socially promoted to at least some degree.

5. The following section is excerpted from *Powerful Stories, Positive Results: Arizona At-Risk Project Report* (Vandegrift, Bierlein & Greene, 1991).

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ISSUES AND ANSWERS

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